

A LETTER FROM HOME



THE MERIDIAN STAR

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PHOTO BY PAULA MERRITT / THE MERIDIAN STAR

COMMUNITY LEADER

Tommy Dulaney, president and chief executive officer of Structural Steel Services Inc., stands in his company's No. 2 plant in the South Industrial Park. *The Meridian Star* named Dulaney its “Citizen of the Year” for his devotion to the community — and the “steady, reliable hand” he lends every organization with which he is affiliated.

— Suzanne Monk,
managing editor

Tommy Dulaney: Lifelong overachiever

By **Fredie Carmichael**
staff writer

The wheels on 9-year-old Tommy Dulaney's bicycle rolled over miles of Meridian roadway in the late 1940s — not for recreation, but to help put food on his family's table.

Dulaney's father, a plant worker at Flintkote at the time, had been diagnosed with a brain tumor. It was 1948. After the diagnosis, his father had to quit his job and the family opened a grocery store on 49th Avenue.

Dulaney's job: Using his bicycle to pedal fresh groceries to customers. “My brother, who is 19 months older than me, got to cut meat,” he said. “I was too young. They wouldn't let me do that. They were too afraid I'd cut myself.”

Years later, in the final three years of his father's life, a teenage Dulaney put in 55 hours a week as a car hop at Brookshire's Drive-In near College Park. He made 20 cents an hour,

before being promoted to soda jerk for 50 cents an hour.

“I don't think they'd heard of child labor laws back then,” said Dulaney, who attended Kate Griffin Junior High School at the time.

“I got out of school at 2:30 and worked until 10:30 at night,” he said.

From an early age, the odds were stacked against Tommy Dulaney. He didn't have it easy. But today, more than 57 years after that first job delivering groceries, the quiet self-starter with a big heart has become one of the most successful businessmen in the South.

Dulaney is president and chief executive officer of Structural Steel Services Inc., a steel fabrication business he opened in 1975. He also serves on so many community boards and organizations it's nearly impossible to list them all. He's involved.

His work ethic, success and devotion to the community are all

reasons he was named *The Meridian Star's* 2005 “Citizen of the Year.”

“Tommy Dulaney's steady, reliable hand has given every organization he has been associated with a person to lean on,” said Paul Barrett, publisher of *The Meridian Star*.

“He has given of himself behind the scenes — and front and center, if need be. He is an honest man who can be counted on to do the right thing, time and time again. And these days that's a rare commodity. We are lucky to have him as a member of our community and proud to recognize him for all he does to make Meridian and Lauderdale County a better place to live for all of us.”

Dulaney, though, shies away from the spotlight. He credits his strong Christian upbringing, his family and his loyal employees for the successes he's enjoyed.

His wife of nearly 46 years, the former Margaret Reed, says that's one of the qualities about Dulaney

that first drew her — his selfless attitude and tender heart.

Margaret moved across town and became Dulaney's next-door neighbor during his senior year at Meridian High School. Margaret said she still remembers him posing for pictures in his front lawn with his cap and gown.

Soon, Margaret began to miss the school bus regularly and Dulaney offered to drive her instead. The two have been nearly inseparable since.

“He struck me as an honorable man,” she said. The couple has a daughter and son-in-law, Cynthia and Ray Gibbons, and two grandchildren, Carissa Cardwell Murray and Cole Cardwell.

“He was raised by such a wonderful mother and grandmother,” Margaret said. “They have so much to do with the person he is.”

Dulaney's personality and steadfast loyalty aren't lost outside of his personal life.

How Iraq touches every life

■ Presenting the fifth in a series of annual editions by our readers

There's a trick to choosing a theme for *The Meridian Star's* annual Profile edition. It has to be nearly universal. It has to be something that touches every life, every heart, every church and business.

You wouldn't think the remnant of a war half a world away would qualify. But it does.

At last count, about 150,000 military personnel were serving in Iraq. Forty percent of those, or about 60,000, were National Guardsmen or Reservists — which includes hundreds of our friends and neighbors in East Central Mississippi and West Central Alabama. If you count cumulative rotations since 9/11, that number climbs into the thousands.

The next time you're at church, or a community meeting, ask how many people there are related to a Guardsman, Reservist or member of the regular, active-duty military. About half the hands will go up. Now, ask how many are friends, acquaintances or co-workers ... the rest of the hands will go up.

Is it because this part of the country, the Bible Belt, is especially patriotic? Is it because a major military base is here, Naval Air Station Meridian, which also happens to be Lauderdale County's largest employer?

Whatever the reason, connection to the struggle for democracy in a Third World country is a saturation issue for us.

In addition to the Navy base, Meridian has seven Guard and Reserve units: the Mississippi Air National Guard's 186th Air Refueling Wing, 238th Air Support Operations Squadron and 248th Air Traffic Control Squadron; the headquarters company of the Mississippi Army National Guard's 150th Combat Engineer Battalion and 185th Aviation Group, Company G; and the U.S. Army Reserve's 1181st Transportation Terminal Unit and the 83rd Artillery, 3rd Battalion, Battery A.

Newton is the home of the Army Guard's 204th Air Defense Artillery, 1st Battalion. Philadelphia has the Army Guard's 298th Corps Support Battalion and 367th Maintenance Company, Detachment 1.

This is by no means all of the units in which our Guardsmen and Reservists serve; some are attached to units in Jackson, Hattiesburg and other parts of the state.

You'll read about many of them in “Profile 2005: A Letter from Home” — the fifth in an annual series of reader-written special editions.

It is dedicated to regular, active-duty military, Guardsmen and Reservists. Those who have been called up and served, either overseas or with stateside support missions, and come home. Those who are overseas now. Those who stand ready to receive orders.

And, especially, to the four “fallen angels” from our immediate readership area: Pfc. Christopher Mabry of the U.S. Marine Corps; Sgt. Joshua Ladd and 1st Lt. Matthew Stovall, both of the 367th Maintenance Company; and, most recently, Sgt. Robert McNail of the 150th Combat Engineer Battalion.